

A Critique of The Effects of Essay Topics on Modal Verb Uses in L1 and L2 Academic Writing

王婷/文

Abstract

This critical review assesses Eli Hinkel's research paper *The Effects of Essay Topics on Modal Verb Uses in L1 and L2 Academic Writing* in terms of both writing process and writing product. It acknowledges the merits as well as the flaws of the paper and concludes with future study suggestions.

Keywords: Critique; L2 Academic Writing; Modality

Introduction

Eli Hinkel, an expert teacher in ESL and applied linguistics, conducted a quantitative research on modal verb uses in academic writing associated with different topics. Despite a few pitfalls, Eli's research sheds light on the topic effect on L2 essay writing. This critical review is going to assess the research paper in terms of both writing process and writing product and provide some suggestions for further research. It is divided into the following three parts: the summary, the critique and the conclusion.

Summary

The research aims to examine native and non-native uses of modal verbs in academic writing and carries out a quantitative analysis of a small corpus (718 essays/201,601 words written by both American and Asian students). The results show that median frequency rates of modal verbs in those L2 essays are apt to be influenced by the writing topic. Specifically, the frequency rates of possibility and ability modals seem to be less topic-dependent than those of obligation and necessity in L2 writing. The author concludes that more personally distant topics elicit fewer disparities between L1 and L2 writing and recommends a balance between broad-based and personal or culturally-dependent topics.

Critique

The paper has primarily displayed the following merits.

First of all, the paper contains an abundant and carefully annotated literature review in the introduction. Hinkel (2009) claims the popularity of topic effect research at the very beginning - "the influence of topics and prompts on reader ratings and on the usage of linguistic features in essay texts represent two distinctive research venues". She then talks about the current research in topic effect on L1 and L2 writing in the follow-up sub-sections with her own opinions on each. For example, she commented on the examination of SAT essay scores by Breland, "Regrettably, the researchers were not able to identify the reasons for these disparities in the essay scores" (p. 668). Hinkel's critical view on the whole body of previous studies shows her authorial identity and credentials, which makes herself convincing. In addition, Hinkel sets forth her niche after the adequate literature review — "In light of the research findings to date, it seems important to establish whether L1 and L2 writing on identical topics elicits similar or divergent frequency rates of modal verbs, with an overarching goal of informing and refining topic and prompt development" (p. 670).

Second, Hinkel (2009) has shown her cross-cultural awarenesses in the discussion of findings. She has seen modal verb uses as the "linguistic manifestations of socio-cultural values in discourse (p. 677)" and accounts for the divergent uses between native and non-native students in respect of cultural differences. For example, she explains the reason for Japanese's extensive use of possibility/ability modals can and could as the translations of Japanese verbal markers and affixes "conveying potentiality and ambiguity" that are requisite in expressing one's opinions" (p.676-677). More importantly, Hinkel finds out that "the social roles and culturally-dependent constructs of obligation and necessity entailed in the meanings of" obligation/ necessity modals are divergently realized in native and non-native students' text (p. 679). Therefore, the non-native and the native have different cultural values as collectivism versus individualism. The strong sense of "social and mutual responsibility" among the non-natives results in the high rates of obligation and necessity modal verb uses in L2 writing. Apart from the findings in non-native writing features, characteristics of native writing are also discussed in terms of socio-cultural factors. For

instance, native speakers' preference of possibility/ability modals may and might, use of "a variety of lexical and syntactic devices" and general suggestions (p. 677& 679) are considered by Hinkel as the results of "notably missing" sense of obligation.

Last but not least, there is good cohesion in the paper. Hinkel (2009) applies topic sentences or even topic paragraphs and transitional sentences or paragraphs to maintain unity throughout the text. For instance, in the introduction of topic effect on L1 essay evaluations, the first sentence "By far...by individual researchers in their respective colleges and universities in connection with institutional assessments of students' writing quality" serves as both a lead-in and an inclusion of the contents (institutional assessment and standardized tests) in the following two paragraphs (p. 668).

Apart from the abovementioned strengths, the paper has mainly the following two weaknesses.

Firstly, some terms are inexact and even misused. In the research, Hinkel (2009) only examines essays written by Americans, Chinese, Korean and Japanese and therefore the term "L1" and "L2" in the title should be narrowed down to "American" and "Asian". Besides, Hinkel (2009) does not make between epistemic and deontic modal verbs a clear-cut distinction, which is very important for understanding the cultural influence on modal usage. According to Palmer (2001), a modal verb (also modal, modal auxiliary verb, modal auxiliary), which gives more information about the function of the main verb that follows it, is a type of auxiliary verb used to indicate modality, i.e. likelihood, ability, permission, and obligation. Despite their varied communicative purposes, there is a scale of functions ranging from possibility ("may") to necessity ("must"). Within this scale there are two functional divisions: epistemic, concerned with the theoretical possibility of propositions being true or not true (including likelihood, and certainty); and deontic, concerned with possibility and necessity in terms of freedom to act (including ability, permission, and duty). The general distinction between 'epistemic' and 'deontic' resides in the scale ranging from the most strong "must proposition" to the least strong "may proposition", which indicates the degree of the speaker's commitment to the statement. Hinkel (2009, p. 674) alludes to the distinction but does not specify that 'epistemic is individualistic in nature (personal choice) while deontic is collectivistic in nature (social obligation).

Secondly, the methodology is to some extent problematic. Hinkel has talked about topic effect on L1 and L2 evaluations and on L2 writing features (p. 668-670), yet she does not talk about the relationship between modal verb uses and essay evaluations. Since her goal is to make fewer disparities between L1 and L2 writing by "informing and refining topic and prompt development", Hinkel should have expounded on whether different uses of modal verbs result in different essay scores. Besides, the criteria for choosing the students are not clear. The non-native students vary in not only nationalities

but also education level. Although Hinkel (2009) has accounted for the culturally-dependent uses of modals in the discussion (p. 676), she doesn't take into consideration the different levels of education. The only similarity among the non-native students is their TOEFL scores (ranged from 563 to 617) which still can't guarantee the similar "English language proficiency". These factors might decrease the reliability of the findings. Moreover, there is imbalance among the five assigned writing topics, for four are on personal experience and only one on public issues. There should be a balance in both kinds to collect adequate data for analyzing topic effect.

Conclusion

In summary, Hinkel (2009) has done sufficient preparatory work before the research and expressed her cross-culturally awareness of modal verb uses in a cohesive way, in spite of some pitfalls in terminology and methodology. Generally speaking, the research provides further information on the use of modal verbs in academic writing, yet it is far from being conclusive. As we notice in the paper, modals are only one means of modality, which can be realized through many other ways such as inferentials, hearsay markers, reportatives (Palmer, 2001), hedging devices (Hinkel, 2009, p. 677), etc. These too are features that can be found in academic writing and are worth further studying. Moreover, future studies can move from mere accounts of cultural values' influence on modal verb uses to the close examinations of how to control and minimize the negative discourse-pragmatic transfers in L2 writing from the non-native culture. The discourse-pragmatic functions of modal verbs as well as other means of modality should be one of the foci in L2 teaching syllabus and there need to be explicit specifications for ESL teachers to follow. The teachers should be aware of the cultural differences between the students' home culture and the target culture and be well trained in pragmatic teaching of modality.

References

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(作者单位：厦门大学外文学院)